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ABSTRACT

Undecided college students, those students who have entered college without declaring a major field of study, make up a significant population. Counselors can help undecided college students by using a four-step career decision-making model, consisting of the steps of self-awareness, career information, decision-making, and an action plan. In the first step, students reflect upon themselves and generate self-information about their interests, values, skills and abilities, experiences, and personality characteristics. In the second step, students gather career information, such as the nature of work tasks, salaries, training pathways, employment outlook, work environment, opportunities for advancement, related occupations, hours, personal qualities necessary, and how to obtain more information. In the third step, students rate the tentative careers on aspects related to their self-information. The final step involves developing an action plan to follow in reaching career goals. Plans might include developing specific skills, acquiring specific training, joining professional groups, acquiring volunteer or work experience, writing a resume, making contacts in the field, or beginning a job search. These steps have been used by graduate and undergraduate student paraprofessionals to help undecided students at the University of Toledo's Career Information Center. The program has received positive support from the university administration and very positive responses from student users. (NB)

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"Career Development Needs of Students"

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INTRODUCTION

"Undecided" students have traditionally been defined as those students who declare themselves "undecided" when by not declaring a major upon entering college. Educators have tried to redefine that term, however (Titley & Titley, 1980 and 1985). They also recognize the population of students who declare a major, but who are uncertain of it; and those who declare a major and seem certain of its fit, but later elect to change it. Should these students not be defined as "undecided" as well?

No longer can we overlook these students; they must be given attention. They are a significant population. At the University of Toledo, 19% of next year's entering class have declared themselves "undecided" (Hopkins, 1988). One national average is quoted to be 7.3% (Astin, Green, Korn, & Schalit, 1986). Of course, these are only the students who have entered "undecided". We must recognize that there are others who are disguised, but may be as undecided. At the University of Toledo, the administration expects nearly one third of each entering class to change their major at least once throughout their academic career and some as many as three times.

There are many negative attitudes attached to being "undecided" and changing majors. The student himself often feels as though he is without direction, disappointing friends and family, unaffiliated with an academic

department, etc. Parents often feel that their child is without direction, see "undecided" as a financial burden (they want to know that their money is paying for something). Administration often imposes rules on students which make indecision and major changing detrimental to academic progress. They require major-specific courses within the first year, allow little flexibility from college to college, and often do not emphasize the advantages of taking all general requirements first. Therefore, we should help students meet and understand the requirements of academic commitment.

The choice of a major is typically a reflection of occupational choice (Titley & Titley, 1980). More and more, our society has grown to view college as training for a variety of occupations. A survey of over six million freshman showed that 83.1% noted that a very important reason for going to college was "to get a better job". In selecting a specific college, 46.8% said they considered whether the graduates got "good jobs." (Astin, Green, Korn, & Schalit, 1986) Therefore, the career development of students plays a role in their ability to make academic commitments.

Students need to understand career development. They should know that it is the development of interests, skills, personality characteristics, and beliefs in relation to

knowledge about the world of work and how one chooses to fulfill their life purpose. (Zunker, 1986) They need to know that it is a life-long process that they have probable already begun. Students need to understand why career development is important. It reflects personality, determines social identity, dictates education level, influences life style, and sometimes determines residence. The application of career development must be evident. Students should understand how career decision-making is relevant to them. The connections between career development and choosing appropriate courses, colleges, majors, and part-time jobs must be made.

IT IS OK TO BE "UNDECIDED"

Students need to know that being "undecided" is OK. They often feel that they are the only ones who do not know what they want to do. In fact, a significant number of student feel the same way. On many campuses there are courses, services or personnel available to aid them. They sometimes need to be reassured that being undecided is not permanent, and that there are steps to take toward becoming decided. Indecision does not reflect a character flaw. They are simply in a state of indecision. Theses students have probably been undecided about other things, but may be attaching great importance to this decision; hence, adding pressure. They must be assured that decisions are not permanent and most cannot be classified as "right" or

"wrong".

NEED TO BE ACTIVELY INVOLVED

As important as understanding that being undecided is OK, students must understand that they need to be actively involved in the decision-making process. The only way to resolve "undecidedness" is to make a thoughtful decision. It is not a resolution when someone else makes the decision, nor when indecision is allowed to continue. Although one cannot necessarily place a time restriction on oneself, satisfaction can only be gained by progressing through the decision-making process no matter how much time it seems to require.

There are no short-cuts. The "right" decision will not fall out of the sky. Students must take steps to reach a decision. Therefore, many young adults will need help identifying the steps and resources available to them.

STEPS TO CAREER DECISION-MAKING

Many models of decision making have been proposed (Gelatt, 1967; Harris-Bowlsbey, 1986; Krumboltz, Mitchell & Gelatt, 1977) and nearly all of them can be adapted specifically to making career decisions. A simple model might involve only the following four steps: awareness, information, weighing alternatives, and execution. In the following career decision-making model those step are modified to self-awareness, career information, decision-

making, and an action plan.

SELF-AWARENESS

Although college students are young adults, they may not be as aware of their interests, values, skills and abilities, experiences, and personality characteristics as they should be to make a thoughtful career decision. This apparent lack of self-awareness information may be the result of few opportunities to explore themselves or recognize their strengths and weaknesses. In any case, this is a time when students need to know a great deal about themselves.

Students who have had a significant number of experience can often identify their interests, values, and personality characteristics when given parameters in which to discuss or categorize them. Often they can generate self-information by simply reflecting upon themselves. Sometimes they need coaxing or facilitation, but generally they have the information. There are many informal exercises which can get them started, for example: simply asking them to list things which they enjoy, or even dislike and those at which they excel. They only need to become aware of this information and its relevance to their career decisions. For instance, many students do not understand how their creative abilities may be helpful in a sales position, or that their dislike for math should not turn them away from a business program when that is what has always interested

them.

Other students may require more assistance. Without the ability to reflect on themselves or a background of obvious experiences, they may benefit from the use of more structured activities, such as tests or inventories. The market is full of useful tools that are appropriate for college students such as the Self-Directed Search (Holland, 1977), the Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory (Strong & Campbell, 1974), and the Work Values Inventory (Super, 1970). They are easy to complete and interpret, and can be given in a variety of settings (i.e. individually, small groups, or classes). These not only begin to provide students with information about themselves, but also a glimpse of its relationship to career fields.

CAREER INFORMATION

Once students have begun to collect information about themselves, they need to know about careers. They should understand how the world of careers is organized. It is often helpful for them to see how occupations can be grouped, whether according to their involvement with people, data, things, or ideas (Prediger, 1976) or personality characteristics (Holland, 1985). This allows them to recognize characteristics about career fields as well as keep them investigating a wide range of titles before narrowing their focus.

Investigating careers is often an area where students

do not spend enough time. They read general information and give an occupation a thumbs-up or -down without investigating further. Reviewing information from several sources is recommended.

Another point to emphasize is the variety of resources available to students from which to gain information. These resources may be formal or informal, require some effort or very little. Students can be provided with a list of these career information resources. They will be surprised at the number which are readily available to them. They can vary their methods or only use sources with which they find themselves most comfortable. Readily available sources include: career or placement centers, the library, government publications (i.e. Dictionary of Occupational Titles, Occupational Outlook Handbook), professional journals, professionals/workers in the field (i.e. friends, relatives, professors, neighbors), trade unions & professional societies, private & community agencies, volunteer experiences, part-time work, and government agencies (i.e. Department of Labor, Department of Education).

Gathering career information is important because at some point it will be compared with self-information to find an appropriate fit. Therefore, students should keep in mind the things they learned about themselves throughout their investigation. They must have comparable information. If, for example, they found that security was one of the values

they deemed essential, then they will need to know about the employment outlook of specific careers. It will be difficult later to make a thoughtful decision without key pieces of information. Having information about the following areas generally covers most essential points: nature of work tasks, salary range, training pathways (requirements and possible college majors), employment outlook, work environment, opportunities for advancement related occupations, hours, personal qualities necessary, pros and cons, and places one can obtain more information.

DECISION-MAKING

Once the information step has been completed, it is time to make decisions based on the self and career information obtained earlier. This step is sometimes the most difficult. Some students will find it difficult because they have little experience making decisions or because it seems so important or final. Therefore, it is helpful to have a model or method for them to follow as an aid.

One helpful strategy is to rate the tentative careers on aspects related to their self-information. For example, rate on a scale from one to five how well a specific career meets or matches the student's values, interests, etc. Items to be rated might include: chance of completing training, ability to perform work tasks, comfort with the work setting, and monetary satisfaction. An overall rating

should be given for each career as well. This kind of system gives students an opportunity to make many small decisions and provides more information. Once this task is completed, they will be prepared make a decision about which career might be best suited for them based on all of these factors.

ACTION PLAN

Students often consider making the decision the final step. In fact, without making plans to reach the goals associated with that decision, it may never be carried out. Many small steps can be included in an action plan. Students should be encouraged to include as many of them as possible. These plans will serve as a step-by-step guide for reaching their career goals. These plans might include developing specific skills, acquiring specific training (i.e. enrolling in a program), joining professional groups or societies, gaining experience via volunteer, intern, or work experiences, writing a resume, making contacts in the field, or beginning a job search.

Without making an action plan it can be easy to drift off track or lose sight of the key elements which might be the "best" preparation for entering a career. A plan serves as a guide which can be referred to and modified again and again as needed. Students should be encouraged to be as specific as possible and even include a time frame to complete each step.

These steps have been used to help "undecided" students at the University of Toledo's Career Information Center. This service, geared specifically to students making decisions about their careers or education, employs these steps and has found them to be a successful way to guide students through the career decision-making process.

During this past year the Career Information Center made contact with approximately 3,000 student. 63% of those students sought assistance because they were undecided about their major or career. Each of these students was guided through the career decision-making steps by paraprofessional counselors. These counselors assess the needs of the students, explain the steps of the model, and help them use the resources available in the Center. They administer and interpret inventories, assist students using the computerized guidance systems (DISCOVER, SIGI PLUS, Ohio Career Information System), make appropriate referrals to other services and academic advisors, help locate information in the resource library, and assist them with an action plan.

The paraprofessionals in this program are graduate and undergraduate students trained in the area of career development. The program has received positive support from the University administration and very positive responses from student users. Although these steps have been employed only in this setting they certainly are applicable to others (i.e. one-on-one counseling, classroom, groups).

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